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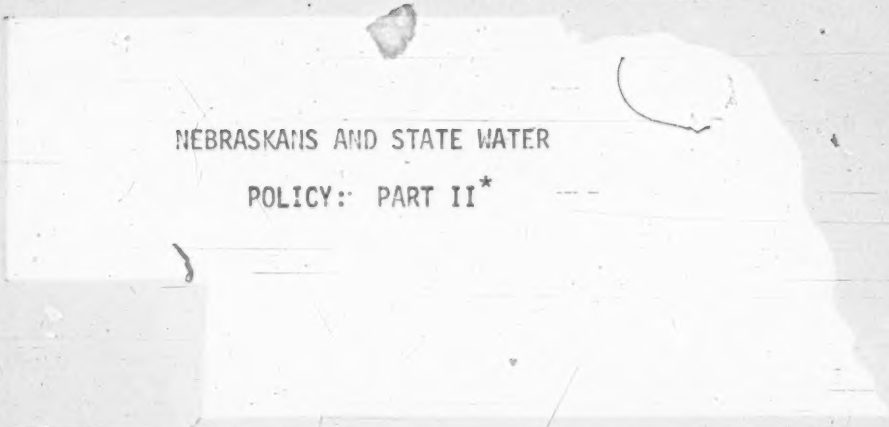

NEBRASKANS AND STATE WATER POLICY: PART II*

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NEBRASKA ANNUAL SOCIAL INDICATORS SURVEY

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NEBRASKANS AND STATE WATER POLICY: PART II*

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Price: $ .50

The Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey

Lynn K. White: 1979 Study Director

The findings in this report are based on data collected in the third Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS). This survey is part of an on-going study of the quality of life in Nebraska conducted by the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

In 1979 a representative sample of 1882 Nebraskans eighteen years of age or older living in households was interviewed by telephone. The respondents to the 1979 survey are part of a panel originally selected and interviewed in 1977 and 1978. They will be re-interviewed every two years in order to provide information on changing quality of life. The interviews averaged approximately 40 minutes and included questions about environment, health, crime, political attitudes, occupation, education, family life and other matters reflecting the quality of life experienced in the state. For the entire sample, 95 out of 100 times the percentages computed from the items asked on the survey are likely to be accurate to within plus or minus 2.3 percent of the figure that would have been obtained if each adult in Nebraska had been surveyed. This is an estimate of maximum error and for most items the percentages are likely to be even more accurate.

The data gathered by NASIS are used by a wide variety of State and local government agencies for policy and program planning and by faculty and students at the University of Nebraska and other colleges for research. No information identifying any respondent is released to any users and the strict confidentiality of individual respondents is rigidly enforced. While the final responsibility for the organization and structure of the survey and for reports produced under its name rests with the Bureau of Sociological Research, public agencies and University departments play an integral part in planning the survey through an Advisory Committee. Public organizations interested in membership on the Advisory Committee should contact the NASIS Study Director.

Funding for NASIS comes from the University of Nebraska, The Bureau of Sociological Research, and State and local agencies which buy items and data analysis from the survey.

The NASIS surveys are repeated each year to measure changes in the quality of life in Nebraska. While there is a core of questions which is included every year, each survey has a large component of unique items which address specific topical issues. Plans for future years include interviewing a new sample of Nebraskans in 1980 as well as continuing to re-interview the 1977 panel every two years to assess changes in their lives. Additional detail on the NASIS surveys regarding use of the survey data or cost of purchasing items on future surveys can be obtained by contacting Lynn K. White, NASIS Study Director, at the Bureau of Sociological Research or by sending for a copy of the 1980 NASIS Prospectus.

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ABSTRACT

As part of the 1979 NASIS questionnaire, over 900 people were asked a series of questions about water policy. This report discusses the findings concerning regulation of water for agricultural use. Most Nebraskans do favor such regulation--by a wide margin. There is less consensus on who should do the regulating, but local governments and Natural Resource Districts are the first and second choice of most. Minorities of less than 20% favor self-regulation by irrigators or regulation by the state; the federal government is favored by only a few. Strong consensus appears on types of regulation that should be implemented:

----most favor limiting the number of wells in a certain area

----most favor limiting water drawn from a well each year

----most oppose a moratorium on new well drilling, though there are regional differences here

----most oppose taxing water drawn from wells

----most oppose taxing water drawn from streams

Most Nebraskans have not heard of one of the more commonly discussed and controversial suggestions for mitigating the water problem--transbasin diversion. Of those who have heard of it and have opinions one way or another, more oppose it than favor it.

These opinions suggest that Nebraskans may be ahead of their elected officials in wanting action on this important policy problem. There is probably more agreement among the public than public officials had guessed.

Introduction

What policies should be implemented concerning water for agricultural use? This is one of the most important public policy issues in Nebraska. Agriculture is a keystone of the state's economy and water is essential to its productivity. Recent declines in ground water levels in some parts of the state have produced serious discussion about what, if anything, we should do to conserve our water resources. There are two general but distinct alternatives available to policy makers. One alternative is to monitor water use closely and regulate where necessary so that water will continue to be available, though in some cases on a more limited scale than what users would wish. The other alternative is to let each irrigator and other user look out for his or her own best economic interests now, using as much water as desired, hoping that technological solutions or natural increments in groundwater levels will solve tomorrow's problems in due time.

Traditionally, in Nebraska, farmers in water short areas have been more predisposed to regulation and conservation than farmers in areas where water shortages are not so immediate. In the latter case, the propensity has been to advocate "self-regulation" which is really no regulation at all. Then, too, irrigators have, as one might expect, tended to favor self-regulation. Policy makers have responded by setting up Groundwater Conservation Districts and later Natural Resource Districts to monitor water use. Though hearings about possible regulation have been held by a few N.R.D.'s, no strong regulatory action has yet been taken by the state or by these Districts. Is this policy of inaction favored by the people of the state? Rarely has the public been asked what they think about this policy area which is of crucial concern to them. This paper reports on a study of the attitudes of Nebraskans toward water policy affecting agricultural use. The data are from a survey of nearly 1900 Nebraskans randomly selected and interviewed in a February-March 1979 telephone survey by the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Fifty percent of the Nebraskans sampled

(or over 900) were asked the questions pertaining to water policy. An earlier report showed that: 1) most Nebraskans believe that we have a water shortage now or will in the next 20 years; 2) most favor regulation of water for business and household use; 3) most favor government controls or standards for water use rather than higher prices or taxation. This current paper reports attitudes about regulation of water for agricultural use.

Findings

Table 1 indicates that Nebraskans overwhelmingly favor some kind of regulation of water for agricultural use: Two-thirds favor, less than a quarter oppose, with the rest undecided. At this general level, then, a consensus is found; most favor regulation of this scarce resource. However, consensus is not so great concerning who should do the regulating. Most favor either the N.R.D.'s or local government. Over 60 percent favor one or the other of these locally based organizations. Since we did not ask which local government the respondents favored, we cannot be more specific. Presumably most of the respondents had the county government in mind, since our question asked "local government - such as counties." Slightly less than 20 percent believed that the regulation should be done by the individual irrigator, and an almost equal percent said that the state government should do the regulating. Only 2 percent favored the federal government providing the regulation. We asked those who favored individual regulation what their second choice would be. Again, most favored either the N.R.D.'s or the local government as the regulatory body.

We also asked those who had initially opposed regulation which body they would favor doing the regulation if such regulation were mandated. Here, the largest percent chose the individual irrigator (32%), followed closely by the N.R.D.'s (26%), and local government (24%). Fourteen percent chose the state and three percent the national government as the regulatory body if regulation were mandated.

As one might expect, there are some interesting subgroup differences in

preferences for regulating body. Table 2 shows that farmers are more likely to favor self-regulation, rural non-farm people to favor local governments, and those in communities over 2500, including Lincoln and Omaha, to favor regulation by the N.R.D.'s. The choice of the second largest group of people from communities of 2500 and over is the local government; the second and third largest groups of farmers favor the N.R.D.'s, then local government. Rural nonfarmers favor N.R.D.'s or self-regulation after local government. In sum, if we look at the population by place of residence, N.R.D.'s are the first or second choice of each subgroup, though individual regulation is most favored by farmers, and local government by the rural nonfarmers. The federal government is favored as the regulatory source by very few, while state government has a modest amount of support in each category. An interesting sidelight here is that almost all of those farmers who already irrigate their land (unfortunately there are only 16 of them in our sample) want self-regulation; dryland farmers are almost equally divided among self-regulation, N.R.D. regulation, and local government regulation.

Regional differences are also apparent in support for different regulatory bodies. For example, residents of the Southwest and South Central are almost twice as likely to favor individual regulation than are Nebraskans in other parts of the state. Those in the North and the Panhandle are more likely to favor local government regulation than any other form, but Nebraskans in the rest of the state favor regulation by N.R.D's. Omahans favor state regulation substantially more than other Nebraskans.

Attitudes toward who should regulate also vary by education. More educated Nebraskans are much more likely to favor regulation by N.R.D.'s than are Nebraskans with little education. However, Nebraskans with little education are more likely to favor regulation by local government than those with more education. Nebraskans who have a high school education or less are also more likely to favor "self-regulation." One reason for the differences in views toward N.R.D.'s among groups

with different education levels is that many Nebraskans have not even heard of N.R.D.'s. Table 3 indicates that less than 1/3 of Nebraskans have even definitely heard of N.R.D.'s while another 1/4 think they have heard of them. N.R.D.'s are much more visible to those with more education and to those living in rural areas. Residents of Lincoln and Omaha are least likely to have heard of the N.R.D.'s.

The fact that only a portion of Nebraskans have heard of the N.R.D.'s and that some who claimed they had not heard of them later in the questionnaire picked them as an appropriate regulatory body means that the public is still probably flexible in their choice of such a body. With further information, some members of the public might change their opinion about who should regulate. It does seem clear, however, that the public does prefer local to state or national regulation in this policy area.

Thus far we have discussed regulation in general. Of more specific interest are attitudes toward various types of regulatory activity. Table 4 summarizes views toward a variety of forms of regulation. A vast majority of Nebraskans favor limiting the number of irrigation wells in a given area; over two-thirds favor and only fifteen percent oppose this. Similar proportions favor and oppose limiting the amount of water drawn from a well each year. On the other hand, a majority of Nebraskans oppose simply stopping the drilling of new wells in water short areas (28 percent favor, 53 percent oppose). Even fewer Nebraskans support taxing water drawn from wells (20 percent support) or streams (21 percent support), with about two-thirds opposing each alternative. Thus, as with regulation of water for business and household use, Nebraskans favor controls rather than higher prices as mechanisms for limiting water use in agriculture. They are not entirely consistent in favoring solutions that give the advantage to old or new users. Limiting water drawn from a well each year would seem to affect current and potential irrigators equally, but limiting the number of wells in a given area would tend to favor the already established irrigator. However, the public was not ready to shut out new

users, as evidenced by their opposition to moratoria on new wells.

There were few substantial differences in terms of favoring these alternatives on the part of Nebraskans from different regions, types of residence or education. One exception was that residents of the Panhandle were much more in favor of stopping well drilling entirely (48%) than were residents in other regions (30 to 37%). This might be thought to reflect the greater urgency of the water shortage situation in the Panhandle, although shortages there have not been as great as in other parts of Nebraska such as the Southwest. A moratorium on drilling new wells was also much more likely to be favored by those with less education (43% of those without a high school degree, 38% with a high school degree) than those with more (20% of those with a college degree). Differences in regional and educational groups were also found in attitudes toward taxing water drawn from wells. This alternative was much more likely to be favored by Nebraskans from the North (29%), the Southeast (28%), and Omaha (24%) than by the rest of the state (13 to 18%). And both very well educated Nebraskans (30%) and the least educated group of Nebraskans (30%) were more likely to favor this form of taxation than those in the middle-education groups.

Finally, we asked Nebraskans if they favored transbasin diversion, one alternative that has been discussed as a possible partial solution to our water problems. Transbasin diversion would transport water from one river basin to another, where water is in shorter supply. First, most Nebraskans (77%) had never heard of this proposal, while only 12% definitely had heard. Of those who had heard of transbasin diversion or who thought they had heard of it, only 29% favored it, while 37% opposed it. The remainder of the sample thought whether they would ultimately favor such a solution would depend on other factors such as the cost, ecological damage, and the like.

Conclusions

Water policy has been a frequently discussed area in the press and among state

officials in the past several years. We find this concern reflected in the attitudes of our sampled population. Most are concerned about the possibility of a water shortage. Most favor regulation of water for business, household, and for agricultural use. This paper has reported on attitudes about regulation of water for agricultural use. An overwhelmingly large proportion of Nebraskans do favor regulation of this important water use. There are substantial differences of opinion as to what group should do the regulating, but large proportions favor either N.R.D.'s or local governmental bodies. Some favor only self-regulation by irrigators; this view appears particularly frequently among irrigators themselves, though we have too few of them in our sample to draw any concrete conclusions about their attitudes. On the whole it appears that while N.R.D.'s are still unknown by a goodly number of Nebraskans, among those who know about them, they have gained a good deal of legitimacy as potential water regulators.

As to specific forms of regulation, we asked about only a few of the many possible. Generally support was strong for limiting the number of wells per area and for limiting the amount of water drawn from wells each year. Little support was displayed for a moratorium on well drilling (except by residents of the Panhandle) or by taxation of water drawn from streams and wells. There was little knowledge about transbasin diversion, and the plurality of those who did know something about it were against it.

These questions only scratch the surface of what is a complex area of public policy. Yet, it would appear that in this area (as in others) the public is out in front of its elected officials in not only being aware that a problem exists, but being willing to do something about it. Some opposition to water regulation will always exist, especially on the part of those being regulated; however, these data would seem to show that a reservoir of support for regulation of this scarce resource does exist.

Table 1. Support for Regulation of Agricultural Water Use.

	Yes	No	DK
Regulate Farm Irrigation?	67%	24%	9%
Of those responding "Yes" -			
Who should regulate?			
Individual irrigator	18%		
N.R.D.'s	33		
Local government	31		
State government	16		
Federal government	2		
Of those responding "No" -			
If mandated by government, who should regulate?			
Individual irrigator		32%	
N.R.D.'s		26	
Local government		24	
State government		14	
Federal government		3	

Table 2. Sources of Support for Different Regulatory Agencies.

	Total	N.R.D.'s	Local	State	Federal	Individual
Community Type						
Lincoln or Omaha	100%	40%	28%	22%	3%	7%
2,500 to 50,000	100	40	29	14	1	16
Rural Nonfarm	100	21	41	14	3	21
Rural Farm	100	26	24	12	0	38
Region						
Panhandle	100%	35%	39%	7%	5%	14%
Southwest	99	36	26	8	0	28
South Central	100	28	29	12	1	30
North	100	23	42	15	1	18
Omaha	100	35	26	23	3	13
Southeast	100	36	31	17	2	14
Education						
Less than high school graduate	101%	18%	46%	12%	5%	20%
High school graduate	99	29	29	16	1	24
Some college	100	39	32	15	2	12
College graduate	101	50	18	20	2	11

Table 3. Awareness of Natural Resource Districts

	Definitely Yes	Think So	No
Heard of Natural Resource Districts (N.R.D.)?	30%	24%	47%

	Yes	Uncertain	No or Never Heard of Them
Ever Voted for N.R.D. Board?	21%	6%	73%

Percent Who Have Heard of N.R.D.'s by Group

	Definitely Yes	Think So
Farm	46%	30%
Rural Nonfarm	31	22
Towns of 2,500 to 50,000	30	27
Lincoln and Omaha	21	20
Less than high school graduate	23%	22%
High school graduate	26	26
Some college	33	24
College graduate	42	23

Table 4. Support for Various Methods of Regulation of Water for Agricultural Use.

	Yes	No	DK
Limit Number of Wells in a Given Area	69%	15%	15%
Limit Water Drawn from a Well in a Given Year	70	15	15
Stop Drilling New Wells	28	53	20
Tax Water Drawn from Streams	21	64	15
Tax Water Drawn from Wells	20	66	14

List of reports already released using data gathered in the 1979 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey. These may be purchased at the indicated price from the Bureau of Sociological Research of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Report Number	Title
1	Designs, Procedures, Instruments, and Forms for the 1979 NASIS. Lynn K. White. Price: $7.50.
2	Taxes: Are They Fair? Susan Welch and Alan Booth. Price: $ .50.
3	Nebraska's Children -- Learning to Work. Lynn K. White and David B. Brinkerhoff. Price: $ .75.
4	Nebraskans' Evaluations of Their State Government. Alan Booth and Susan Welch. Price: $ .50.
5	Nebraskans and State Water Policy: Part I. Susan Welch and Gordon Kissel. Price: $ .50.
6	Energy: Voluntary Household Conservation in Nebraska. Lynn K. White and Nikolai Rudakov. Price: $1.00.